Are You Ready?

Photo by PH3 T. J. Talarico. Composite.

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As naval aviators—especially as helicopter pilots—we always train for emergencies by knowing our aircraft, its limits, and emergency procedures. We even give considerable thought to some contingencies not found in NATOPS, but does this mean we really are ready for an emergency?

Six months ago, our *[squadron]* skipper held ready-room training and shared with us a parable about *involvement* versus *commitment*. On the blackboard, he drew a picture of a bacon-and-egg breakfast. A confused but curious ready room watched as he explained the difference with, "The chicken is involved with breakfast, but the pig is committed to breakfast."

The breakfast scenario is not this article's focus, so you can come up with your own scenario involving a ship and an aircraft, and what follows still will apply.

Remember, as an embarked squadron, we frequently train with our surface experts so they understand what we do and what they can expect from us. We cannot train for every possible contingency, but, in this case, we didn't ensure the ship would be able to meet what is not an uncommon need.

Our helo was returning to our ship at night after having departed earlier under clear, moonlit conditions. The weather had changed significantly and was now 0/0 (zero visibility and zero ceiling) in solid fog. Think about the bacon-and-egg parable: The ship is involved with flight operations, but our detachment is committed to them because the detachment keeps our aircraft flying and our fellow aviators safe in the helicopter.

We work closely with the ship since we ultimately all are U.S. Sailors. Meanwhile, fellow aviators are committed to helping one another, and that commitment includes getting the aircraft back safely on deck.

Back to our situation: We were unable to correctly execute an emergency low-visibility approach (ELVA). The ship was at flank speed, heading toward better visibility. The ASTAC (anti-submarine or anti-surface warfare tactical air controller) had vectored our helo in on a good approach, and our detachment stood by to work with the ship and to execute smoke-light procedures.

Only one thing could go wrong at this point, and it did. At 0100, when the call for the smokes came, we could not find the ship's duty gunner's mate who had the armory key. When we did find him, he could not get the lock off the armory door. By now, 40 minutes had elapsed from our initial call for smokes, and we still couldn't make it happen.

Ultimately, we found the right keys and got the flares, enabling us to safely guide in the helo. Nevertheless, the delay was frustrating and unnecessary and could have caused more serious consequences.

Here's what our detachment learned from this incident.

We are the aviation experts, and the ship looks to us for aviation know-how. Meanwhile, our ship is prepared to handle an aircraft mishap; they train for it and have procedures in place.

What about the unwritten simple expectations, such as availability and accessibility of smokes for a smoke-light approach? Our detachment realized we must take the initiative to make sure the ship is ready when we call on them. Being committed to safely bringing home our fellow aviators also took on new meaning.

"The chicken is involved with breakfast, but the pig is committed to breakfast."

We still rely on our ship, but this experience spurred us to apply ORM and to initiate other controls. In our case, it was as simple as staging smokes in a more accessible storage area. The detachment remained committed to flight operations, while the ship continued to be involved.

The next time our detachment goes to sea, we will continue to be assertive with our safety plan. Our skipper's parable made us realize that understanding a procedure can be as simple as bacon and eggs. S